

Volatile Voters, Well-Thought-Out Choices? An Analysis of the Vote Choice Determinants of Volatile and Stable Voters *

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Abstract

While long-term factors have lost ground in explaining how voters choose a party, short-term factors are generally thought to have become more important. While the first aspect is well-documented, empirical evidence on the latter aspect is relatively sparse. This paper investigates the question whether dealignment is associated with an increase in weight of short-term factors by comparing how volatile and stable voters decide what party to vote for. To this end, panel data on voting behavior in the British 2010, the German 2005 and the Dutch 2003 elections are employed. Both explanatory models of vote choice as well as voters' self-reported motivation to vote for a particular party are analysed and the short-term factors focused upon are leaders and performance evaluations. The main conclusion from the analyses seems to be that, contrary to conventional wisdom, these short-term factors are not of more importance for the volatile than what holds for stable voters.

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1 Introduction

Over the past decades, the bonds between voters and parties has been eroding through a process labeled dealignment. This trend is apparent from declining turnout levels, a sharp decrease of party membership rates and increasing levels of electoral volatility (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002, Dalton, 2007).

As an important aspect of change, scholars have noted that the vote choice process of electorates in advanced industrial democracies has altered substantially. At both sides of the Atlantic, it seems as if the earlier dominant forces shaping voting behavior are gradually losing ground. In the United States, scholars have noted a substantial erosion of party attachments (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). In the established democracies in Europe, on the other hand, it is the impact of social cleavages on voting behavior that has been shown to be waning (Clark and Lipset, 1991, Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 2009, Evans and Tilley, 2011, Best, 2011).

The finding of the waning of structural factors in voting behavior has led scholars to speculate on what factors have replaced for the impact of partisanship and cleavages on vote choices. It is then assumed that we should observe a shift from long-term factors of voting behavior towards short-term determinants. Scholars have argued that issue-positions, aspects of accountability and leader images should all become more important in the vote choice process (Walczak, van der Brug and de Vries, 2012, Costa Lobo, 2006). While there is a fierce debate on the decrease of partisanship over time and a rich literature on whether or not cleavages have declined, the question whether other factors are becoming increasingly important has received remarkably little attention. As a consequence, there is only scant empirical evidence for the claim that short-term factors are indeed gaining in importance. If so, then equally important is the question what type of short-term determinants are becoming more important. As Dalton *et al.* (2002, p. 60) have argued, there are two possible options; either the dealigned make well-thought out vote choices or they become vulnerable to the demagogic appeals of populist parties and politicians.

As holds for all processes of political change, dealignment proceeds gradually only. A number of aspects of voting behavior, however, are regularly pointed out as being consequences of dealignment. Scholars have argued that a rise in electoral volatility, in late-decision making and in split-ticket voting are all indications of the erosion of strong bonds between parties and voters (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002, Lachat, 2007). If dealignment implies a shift

towards the short term, then this should be obvious from how the dealigned decide what party to vote for. In the current paper this question is investigated by focusing on differences in voting behavior and in reasons for the vote choice between stable and volatile voters.

The paper is structured as following. First comes an overview of the literature on the waning of long-term determinants of vote choices on the one hand and the alleged increase in importance of short-term vote choice determinants on the other. Next comes a presentation of the data used; which are representative panel data on recent elections in Germany (2005), Great Britain (2010) and the Netherlands (2003). These data allow for a clear operationalization of stable and volatile voters, which is crucial for the argument that is being made. After presenting the results of the analyses, the paper ends with some concluding remarks and thoughts on the next steps to take.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Dealignment

Since the publication of *The American Voter*, partisanship has been considered a crucial variable in studies of voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1964). It was soon claimed, however, that psychological attachments between parties and voters were weakening (Dalton, 2007). Ever since, there has been a fierce debate on whether or not we are witnessing a process of dealignment and on the extent to which partisanship is indeed eroding (Dalton, 2007, Bartels, 2002). Within Europe, the observed decline of stability has been linked to a decrease of structural factors of voting behavior and cleavages most importantly (Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 2009, Clark and Lipset, 1991). There is still quite some debate on the continued relevance of factors as class or religion on vote choices (Evans and Tilley, 2011, Nieuwbeerta, Graaf and Ultee, 2000, Brooks, Nieuwbeerta and Manza, 2006, Knutsen, 2004, Jansen, Evans and de Graaf, 2013). It is nevertheless fair to conclude that the impact of structural factors on voting behavior has eroded considerably over the last couple of decades (Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 2009, Evans and Tilley, 2012).

The consequences of dealignment are apparent in a number of aspects of political behavior. Without the strong mobilizing influence of political

parties, turnout rates have been decreasing in most advanced industrial democracies (Franklin, Lyons and Marsh, 2004, Franklin, 2004). Furthermore, scholars have noted a sharp decline in the number of citizens being a member of a political party (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012). Most importantly, electoral results have become more instable. Even though this trend was still questioned in the 1990s (Mair, 1993), its continuation has led to an accumulation of evidence pointing out an increase of electoral volatility (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002, Mair, 2005). The increase in volatility is evident from increased shifts in the vote shares that parties obtain in subsequent elections (also called net volatility) (Pedersen, 1979). At an individual level, inter-election switching, campaign-switching and split-ticket voting are all considered to indicate dealignment (Lachat, 2007). Additionally, late deciding what party to vote for is generally considered to be an indicator of dealignment as well (Blais, 2004, McAllister, 2002).

The fact that change is occurring in multiple countries has led Russell Dalton (2002) to refute the claim that the roots of change are to be found in particular political events or circumstances. Instead, he has argued that *"... party ties were generally eroding as a consequence of social and political modernization"* (Dalton, 2002, p. 22). The process of modernization regularly referred to when explaining why citizens have become dealigned from parties are individualization and cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984, Inglehart, 1977, Thomassen, 2005). With increased levels of education and a multiplication of the available sources for political information, citizens are no longer in need of stable attachments to political parties.

2.2 Short-term determinants of voting behavior

The observation that the impact of structural factors on voting behavior is waning, offers a challenge to theories of voting behavior. Thinking in terms of the classical image of a funnel of causality that leads to a vote choice, scholars have assumed that dealignment implies a shift of weight towards the short-term (Walczak, van der Brug and de Vries, 2012, Costa Lobo, 2006). Compensating for the erosion of partisanship or cleavages, it is argued that factors such as issues, performance evaluations or leaders are becoming more important predictors of vote choices (Walczak, van der Brug and de Vries, 2012, Costa Lobo, 2006, Dalton, 2002).

While there is a rich literature investigating the decline of long-term factors in the vote choice process, there is only scant evidence for the alleged

increase of short-term factors. Looking at differences between generations, Walczak *et al.* (2012) did find issues to have stronger effects explaining the party preferences of younger generations than is the case for older generations. They could not find a similar relation for the impact of performance evaluations, however. Kayser and Wlezien (2011), by contrast, do show that a decline of partisanship is associated with an increase of the economic vote. Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) have furthermore shown that economic evaluations are more important to late deciders. The literature on the personalization of politics additionally implies that leaders should become stronger predictors of vote choices as dealignment proceeds (Garzia, 2013, 2011, McAllister, 2007). Even though this is often considered self-evident, Gidengil (2013) does not find empirical support for the expectation that leaders are of more importance for apartisans than for partisans.

Even though the bit of empirical research available proves to be rather mixed, we assume that conventional wisdom has it right and that short-term factors (issues, performance evaluations and leaders) are indeed more important for the dealigned.

2.3 'Calculating or capricious?'

The process of dealignment is generally thought to have freed voters to choose their parties independently (Rose and McAllister, 1986). The debate on the normative implications thereof, however, is still ongoing. Dalton (2002, p. 60) has argued that there are basically two main options. Either dealignment is *"producing a deliberative public that more closely approximates the classic democratic ideal"*, or populist appeals are becoming more important (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002, Aarts and Thomassen, 2008). Similarly, in his study of late-deciders, McAllister (2002) distinguishes between calculating late-deciders on the one hand and capricious late deciders on the other. While the first are interested in politics, the latter group is not. As a consequence, capricious late deciders are thought to be deciding what party to vote for almost randomly while the calculating group is expected to make well-thought out decisions.

The question what option is the more likely one ties in to the debate on the characteristics of dealigned voters in general and volatile voters more specifically. While instability was originally linked to low levels of political sophistication (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1963), Dalton's framework of cognitive mobilization has led to questioning this assumption. The

main argument is that higher levels of political sophistication make the reliance on partisanship redundant. These high sophisticated apartisans are then thought to thoughtfully reconsider their vote at each election, which renders them volatile (Dalton, 1984, 2007). Most of the empirical research however does indicate that apartisanship is still -and even more strongly so than in the past- related to low levels of political sophistication (Albright, 2009, Dassonneville, Hooghe and Vanhoutte, 2012, 2014, Marthaler, 2008). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that volatile voters should not be considered to be a homogeneous group. Volatile voters can be low as well as high politically sophisticated, and their precise level of political sophistication most likely affects what factors guide their vote choices. More specifically we could expect leaders to be more important predictors for lower sophisticated volatile voters while performance evaluations are expected to be more important for high sophisticated volatile voters.

3 Data and Methods

We investigate the question of whether short-term factors are indeed of more importance for the dealigned by focusing on *party-switching*. Volatility is generally considered to be one of the main consequences of the process of dealignment, and is thought to be driven by the fact that voters have come to choose independently what party to vote for rather than relying on party identification or membership of particular groups in society.

Other scholars have similarly investigated the impact of dealignment on vote choice determinants by focusing on the timing of the vote decision. In such approaches, the late-deciders are considered dealigned, as opposed to those who decided long before what party to vote for. This approach, however, implies a reliance on a question that comes with serious measurement issues due to a strong reliance on voters' memory (McAllister, 2002, Gidengil, 2013). Using information on whether or not voters switched parties from one election to another can be considered a more objective measure of volatility, if not based on recalled vote choices (Waldahl and Aardal, 2000). In this paper, therefore, panel-data is used to distinguish between voters who remained loyal to their party (stable voters) and voters changing parties from one election to the next (volatile voters).

The data used for the current paper are the data from the 2005-2010 British Election Panel, the 2002-2005 panel-component of the German Lon-

gitudinal Election Study and the 2002-2003 panel of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies. These data allow us to investigate voting behavior in the British 2010, German 2005 and Dutch 2003 elections. We hence cover a set of elections in advanced European democracies that vary considerably in the extent to which there is volatility. This variation becomes apparent from looking at figures of net volatility in each of the countries. As clear from Figure 1, the Netherlands have gone through the most pronounced increase of volatility, with elections after 1990 constantly at a high level. For Great Britain and Germany, the pattern is one of ups and down, although in both countries, recent elections seem to become somewhat more unstable. All of the elections focused upon in this paper, seem to be representative for recent elections in those countries.

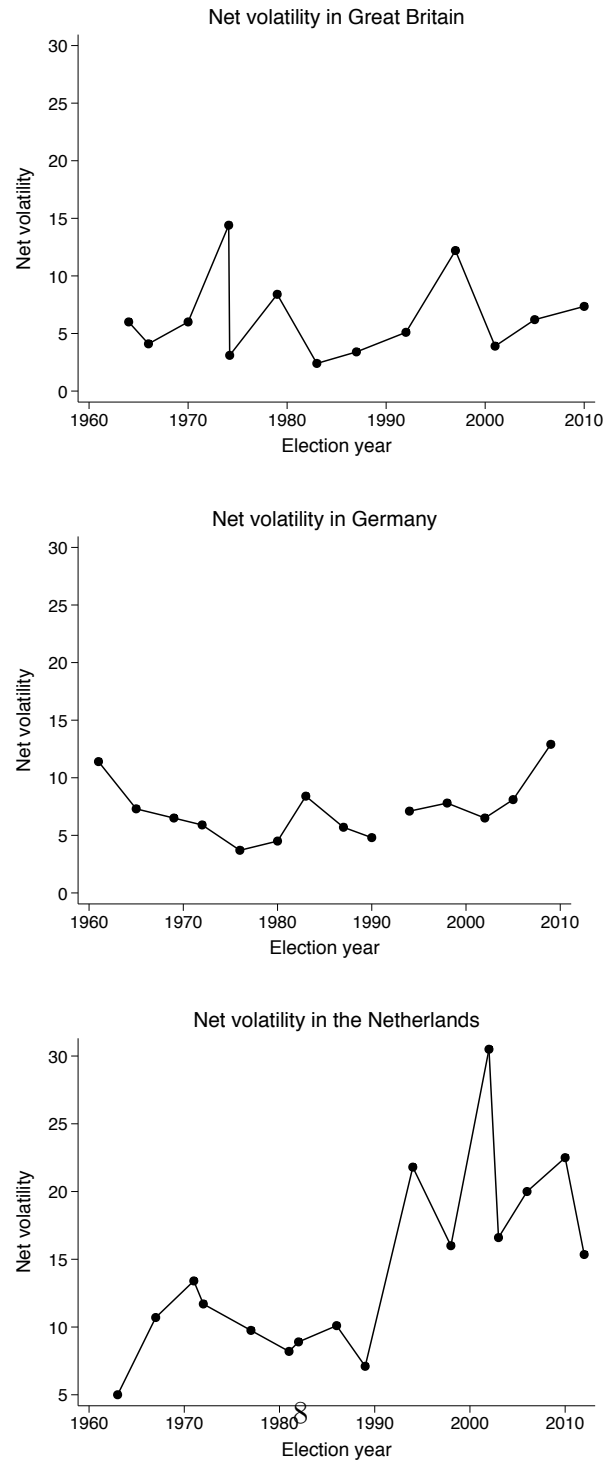
In a first step, we investigate voting behavior in each of the elections by estimating basic models of vote choice. Besides some basic structural determinants of the vote choice (socio-demographics, cleavages, party identification and left-right positions), the short-term factors focused upon in this paper are leaders on the one hand and performance evaluations on the other hand. For leaders information from feeling thermometers is included. The impact of performance evaluations is assessed by the inclusion of a retrospective sociotropic economic evaluation if available. This holds for the British and the German case, but for the Dutch 2003 election, a more general measure of satisfaction with the government is relied on.

Operationalizing volatility by means of panel data does come at the cost of problems of panel attrition. As a consequence, when including information on whether or not voters have switched parties from one election to the next, the sample sizes are reduced. Due to this reduction in sample size, the analyses are focused on the larger parties only. Additionally, this reduction in sample sizes renders multinomial logit regressions inefficient, which is why logistic regressions for voting for each of the parties included are estimated separately.

In order to assess whether the short-term variables of interest are indeed of more importance for the volatile as compared to the stable, interaction terms are included. Each of the short-term indicators is hence interacted with a volatility dummy.

In a second step, we validate the conclusions from the vote choice models by looking at voters' reported reasons for the vote choice. The information from a closed-ended question in the British case and from an open-ended question in the case of Germany and the Netherlands is broken down by

Figure 1: Pedersen index of net volatility over time (1960-2010) in Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands



Source: Own calculations based on election results. Germany before and after unification are considered different time series.

whether or not a voter changed parties from one election to the next. We then simply compare the mean values of the extent to which each of the vote choice reasons was mentioned by stable and volatile voters respectively.

4 Results

4.1 Vote choice determinants

The first country for which we investigate what explains vote choices is Great Britain. In Table 2, we present the results of a set of basic models explaining voting Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrats in the British 2010 elections. In each of the models, voting for the party of interest is contrasted with voting for any other party. The models include some basic socio-demographics (gender, age, religion and income). Furthermore, given its importance in the British context, the impact of party id is controlled for. The short-term factors are of most interest for our analyses. We include respondents' feelings towards each of the party leaders (Labour leader and prime minister Gordon Brown, Conservatives' leader David Cameron and Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats). As a second short-term indicator, economic evaluations are controlled for by means of a retrospective sociotropic assessment of the economy. As evident from the results, most of these factors do indeed contribute significantly to explaining what party British voters have voted for. Additionally, effects are in expected directions, with e.g. a more positive attitude towards Labour leader Brown significantly increasing the probability of voting Labour but decreasing the probabilities of voting Conservative or Liberal Democrat. The effect of economic evaluations as well is in expected directions, with a more positive assessment of the national economy significantly increasing the probability that one votes for the Labour incumbent. Overall, the pseudo- R^2 statistics vary but each indicate a relatively good model fit.

All in all, traditional theories of voting behavior appear to still explain a considerable amount of the variance in voting behavior. It is generally thought, however, that the process of dealignment is an important challenge of these classical theories. In order to verify this assertion, we use the same set of predictors for explaining the votes of stable and volatile voters respectively (results not shown). Doing so it is clear that the model fit for stable voters is considerably higher than the model fit for the volatile. Focusing on voting for

Table 1: Logistic regression of voting in British 2010 elections

	Labour		Conservatives		Liberal Democrats	
Female	0.059	(0.151)	0.038	(0.156)	-0.062	(0.134)
Age	0.003	(0.006)	-0.004	(0.006)	-0.013*	(0.005)
Religion (ref: other)						
Catholic	0.539	(0.296)	-0.023	(0.303)	-0.707*	(0.311)
Protestant	-0.092	(0.166)	0.477**	(0.165)	-0.076	(0.147)
Income	0.007	(0.024)	0.077**	(0.026)	0.016	(0.021)
Labour ID	1.844***	(0.171)	-0.866***	(0.235)	-0.266	(0.168)
Conservative ID	-0.870*	(0.342)	1.641***	(0.176)	-1.454***	(0.250)
Liberal Democrats ID	-1.475***	(0.385)	-0.780**	(0.296)	2.172***	(0.209)
Brown	0.354***	(0.031)	-0.141***	(0.034)	-0.113***	(0.029)
Cameron	-0.116***	(0.031)	0.568***	(0.040)	-0.168***	(0.028)
Clegg	-0.126***	(0.033)	-0.196***	(0.036)	0.447***	(0.035)
Economy	0.210**	(0.070)	-0.100	(0.081)	-0.005	(0.065)
Constant	-3.077***	(0.490)	-2.892***	(0.524)	-2.093***	(0.439)
N	2178		2178		2178	
pseudo R^2	0.495		0.575		0.350	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Labour, the pseudo- R^2 -statistic is 0.720 for stable voters but only 0.202 if the volatile are focused upon. For voting conservatives the pseudo- R^2 -statistics are 0.799 and 0.340 respectively and for voting Liberal Democrats the value is 0.553 for stable voters and drops to 0.237 among the volatile. Only taking into consideration model fit, then, it seems as if rather than a shift in weight of particular predictors, dealignment leads to an overall decrease in what theories of vote choice can explain.

As a more direct test of whether short-term factors such as leaders or performance evaluations are more important for the dealigned, in a next step we interact party switching with each of the short-term indicators. The results of these analyses are presented in Table ?? . Surprisingly, to the extent that interaction terms are significant, they are in opposite directions of what we would expect. Look for example at the effect of feelings towards Gordon Brown on voting behavior. While a more positive attitude towards Brown increases the probability of voting Labour, the interaction term with volatility indicates that this effect is counterbalanced for the volatile. Similar patterns

Table 2: Logistic regression of voting in British 2010 elections - interactions

	Labour		Conservatives		Liberal Democrats	
Female	0.155	(0.195)	0.405*	(0.198)	-0.256	(0.161)
Age	-0.002	(0.008)	-0.005	(0.008)	-0.017**	(0.006)
Religion (ref: other)						
Catholic	0.635	(0.383)	0.187	(0.389)	-0.453	(0.364)
Protestant	-0.300	(0.217)	0.079	(0.207)	0.063	(0.174)
Income	-0.024	(0.031)	0.056	(0.032)	0.013	(0.025)
Labour ID	1.952***	(0.219)	-0.597*	(0.281)	-0.412*	(0.199)
Conservative ID	-0.698	(0.439)	1.555***	(0.224)	-1.575***	(0.296)
Liberal Democrats ID	-2.355***	(0.536)	-0.773*	(0.365)	2.271***	(0.269)
Volatile	0.238	(0.746)	0.011	(0.790)	0.192	(0.701)
Brown	0.497***	(0.059)	-0.347***	(0.062)	-0.185***	(0.048)
Volatile*Brown	-0.342***	(0.080)	0.355***	(0.081)	0.192**	(0.066)
Cameron	-0.175**	(0.056)	0.817***	(0.083)	-0.207***	(0.047)
Volatile*Cameron	0.077	(0.076)	-0.288**	(0.106)	0.017	(0.064)
Clegg	-0.180**	(0.063)	-0.262***	(0.071)	0.579***	(0.063)
Volatile*Clegg	0.111	(0.085)	0.058	(0.088)	-0.214*	(0.086)
Economy	0.390**	(0.122)	-0.082	(0.145)	-0.148	(0.105)
Volatile*Economy	-0.284	(0.189)	0.030	(0.202)	0.298	(0.157)
Constant	-2.690***	(0.779)	-3.072***	(0.801)	-1.778**	(0.653)
N	1577		1577		1577	
pseudo R^2	0.581		0.637		0.398	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

are visible for voting for the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, which would lead to the conclusion that leaders are less and not more important determinants of vote choices of the volatile than what holds for stable voters. The results furthermore do not provide indications for stronger performance voting among the volatile.

Before drawing strong conclusions from the results and in order to move beyond the ideosyncracies of one particular country or one particular election, we also look at voting behavior in other countries. As a second step therefore, we investigate voting behavior in the 2005 German elections. Due to the relatively small number of respondents voting for one of the smaller parties (FDP, Greens or Die Linke), we restrict the analyses to voting for the larger

parties CDU/CSU and SPD. In order not to fully disregard those respondents we hence perform two logistic regressions contrasting voting CDU/CSU and SPD respectively to voting for any of the other parties. As we have done for the British case, in a first step we assess how well a basic model explains voting behavior. The basic model includes the socio-demographic variables gender, age, religious denomination, social class and whether or not the respondent lives in one of the East-German länder. Furthermore, party identification (with CDU/CSU or SPD) as well as respondents' left-right position is controlled for. The short-term predictors of interest are feelings towards SPD-leader and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and feelings towards CDU-leader Angela Merkel on the one hand and a retrospective socio-tropic assessment of the economy on the other. The results of these basic models are presented in Table 3. A look at these models illustrates that the socio-demographic are not strong predictors of voting for one of the large parties. Respondents' self-right placement does not appear to significantly affect choosing CDU/CSU or SPD either. Party identification, on the other hand, is significantly affecting vote choice. Looking at the short-term indicators, then, attitudes towards the leaders do significantly affect the probability to vote for one of the large parties, while economic evaluations do not. Overall, the models do appear to explain a considerable amount of the variation in voting behavior, as clear from the pseudo- R^2 statistics. As was the true for the British case as well, this overall good fit masks considerable differences in explanatory power for explaining the vote of stable voters on the one hand and volatile voters on the other. The results of separate analyses for both groups (not shown) indicate that the pseudo- R^2 for voting CDU/CSU is 0.921 among stable voters but only 0.318 among the volatile. Investigating voting SPD, the pseudo- R^2 is 0.737 for stable voters and drops to 0.282 when only the volatile are focused upon.

In line with how we proceeded for the British case, in a next step it is more directly tested whether short-term factors are indeed more important predictors of the vote choices of the volatile as compared to the stable. Therefore, the short-term predictors (feelings towards Schröder, Merkel and economic evaluations) are interacted with volatility. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 4 and indicate that for the German 2005 elections as well there are hardly any differences in the effects of vote choice determinants of volatile and stable voters. Only one interaction term is significant (Volatile*Schröder), but its implication is that attitudes towards the Chancellor are less strong in predicting whether volatile voter chooses CDU/CSU

Table 3: Logistic regressions of voting in German 2005 elections

	CDU/CSU		SPD	
Female	-0.651*	(0.327)	-0.108	(0.264)
Age	0.008	(0.010)	-0.003	(0.008)
Religion (ref: other/none)				
Catholic	0.801	(0.441)	-0.406	(0.347)
Protestant	0.485	(0.461)	0.060	(0.394)
Social class	0.425	(0.320)	0.241	(0.269)
East	0.143	(0.428)	-0.037	(0.370)
CDU/CSU ID	3.300***	(0.465)	-1.455*	(0.649)
SPD ID	0.071	(0.561)	2.672***	(0.355)
Left right	0.130	(0.087)	0.029	(0.076)
Schröder	-0.226***	(0.058)	0.359***	(0.074)
Merkel	0.391***	(0.077)	-0.077	(0.052)
Economy	-0.121	(0.172)	0.245	(0.153)
Constant	-5.450***	(1.108)	-5.000***	(1.024)
N	615		615	
pseudo R^2	0.614		0.491	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Logistic regressions of voting in German 2005 elections - interactions

	CDU/CSU		SPD	
Female	-0.483	(0.409)	-0.303	(0.334)
Age	0.002	(0.013)	-0.015	(0.011)
Religion (ref: other/none)				
Catholic	0.700	(0.575)	-0.263	(0.436)
Protestant	0.244	(0.610)	0.045	(0.493)
Social class	0.410	(0.391)	0.198	(0.336)
East	0.020	(0.546)	0.023	(0.460)
CDU/CSU ID	4.332***	(0.642)	-0.771	(0.736)
SPD ID	0.427	(0.726)	3.641***	(0.464)
Left right	0.128	(0.115)	0.012	(0.100)
Volatile	-3.067	(1.671)	0.072	(1.664)
Schröder	-0.324**	(0.099)	0.479***	(0.135)
Volatile*Schröder	0.291*	(0.136)	-0.197	(0.185)
Merkel	0.428***	(0.120)	-0.112	(0.090)
Volatile*Merkel	-0.173	(0.181)	0.020	(0.131)
Economy	-0.292	(0.286)	0.237	(0.256)
Volatile*Economy	0.254	(0.431)	0.055	(0.382)
Constant	-3.970**	(1.495)	-4.893**	(1.530)
N	516		516	
pseudo R^2	0.705		0.599	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

than holds for stable voters.

A final country focused upon in this paper, is the Netherlands and voting behavior in the 2003 Dutch elections is looked at. The Dutch context is known to be a country that has been particularly affected by dealignment, resulting in high levels of volatility and a high extent of unpredictability of voting behavior (Dassonneville, 2013, Mair, 2008). This fact would lead us to assume that short-term factors are of large importance in how current-day Dutch voters decide what party to vote for. As was the case for the analyses on the British and German elections as well, the limited number of respondents voting for each of the parties leads us to focusing on the larger parties only. In Table 5, the results of basic logistic regressions explaining voting CDA, VVD and PVDA respectively are presented. These basic models in-

clude a number of socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, religion and social class). Additionally, respondents' self-placement on a left-right scale is controlled for.¹ For the Dutch elections as well, the short-term indicators looked at are attitudes towards leaders and a performance evaluation. The leaders included are CDA-leader and prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, VVD-leader Gerrit Zalm and Wouter Bos, leader of the PVDA. As an indicator of performance evaluations, no economic evaluations were available, but a general assessment of satisfaction with the government's performance is looked at. The results in Table 5 indicate that socio-structural variables are still important for understanding whether Dutch voters choose CDA, VVD or PVDA. Being catholic or protestant for example significantly increases the probability that a voter chooses CDA but decreases the probability of voting for VVD. Furthermore, a higher social class significantly increases the probability of voting VVD but significantly decreases the probability that PVDA is voted for. Focusing on short-term determinants of the vote choice, then, more positive feelings towards the party leaders significantly increase the probability that one votes for their party. Being more satisfied with the government's performance, finally, does not significantly increase the probability that one votes for an incumbent party nor does it significantly decrease the probability of voting for a party in opposition. The overall fit of the models is about the same, with a pseudo- R^2 value of about 0.35 for each of the parties focused upon. Interestingly, and unlike what was found for the British 2010 and the German 2005 elections, the explanatory power of models focusing on the volatile only is not dramatically lower than what holds for the stable only. Analyses (not shown) indicate that for voting CDA, the pseudo- R^2 among the stable is 0.486 and 0.362 among the volatile. For voting VVD, the statistics are 0.401 and 0.405 respectively and they are 0.772 and 0.701 respectively when voting PVDA is looked at.

As a final step, we add interaction terms to investigate whether the impact of short-term predictors is indeed strengthened among the volatile. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 6. In line with what was observed for British and German voters, we do not find evidence for this claim. Looking at the effect of feelings towards leaders on voting behavior, the interaction terms found to be significant point in opposite directions. As such,

¹Given that party identification is not commonly accepted to be a valid concept or a strong predictor for voting behavior in the Netherlands, it is not included in the vote choice models.

Table 5: Logistic regressions of voting in Dutch 2003 elections

	CDA		VVD		PVDA	
Female	-0.087	(0.166)	0.015	(0.198)	-0.281	(0.173)
Age	0.013*	(0.005)	-0.003	(0.007)	0.005	(0.006)
Religion (ref: none)						
Catholic	1.569***	(0.209)	-0.860***	(0.252)	0.147	(0.220)
Protestant	1.052***	(0.217)	-1.168***	(0.283)	0.129	(0.254)
Other	0.390	(0.461)	-0.774	(0.524)	-0.305	(0.430)
Social class	-0.055	(0.094)	0.577***	(0.123)	-0.232**	(0.087)
Left right	0.093	(0.049)	0.526***	(0.068)	-0.398***	(0.055)
Balkenende	0.717***	(0.065)	-0.233***	(0.060)	-0.230***	(0.047)
Zalm	-0.113*	(0.049)	0.620***	(0.071)	0.002	(0.049)
Bos	-0.140**	(0.043)	-0.099*	(0.050)	0.768***	(0.070)
Government satisfaction	0.092	(0.097)	0.079	(0.117)	-0.060	(0.110)
Constant	-6.539***	(0.712)	-7.966***	(0.883)	-2.779***	(0.718)
N	1215		1215		1215	
pseudo R^2	0.345		0.330		0.377	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 6: Logistic regressions of voting in Dutch 2003 elections - interactions

	CDA		VVD		PVDA	
Female	-0.012	(0.209)	-0.058	(0.225)	0.085	(0.322)
Age	0.003	(0.007)	-0.005	(0.008)	-0.014	(0.011)
Religion (ref: none)						
Catholic	1.554***	(0.250)	-1.359***	(0.287)	-0.732	(0.391)
Protestant	1.394***	(0.272)	-1.490***	(0.326)	-0.307	(0.427)
Other	0.833	(0.581)	-0.821	(0.600)	-1.293	(0.907)
Social class	-0.226	(0.121)	0.488***	(0.137)	-0.529**	(0.169)
Left right	0.157*	(0.067)	0.662***	(0.085)	-1.106***	(0.128)
Volatile	0.051	(1.524)	-1.472	(1.484)	0.308	(2.163)
Balkenende	1.079***	(0.117)	-0.469***	(0.084)	-0.665***	(0.123)
Volatile*Balkenende	-0.403*	(0.186)	0.276*	(0.131)	0.079	(0.200)
Zalm	-0.504***	(0.090)	0.666***	(0.103)	-0.172	(0.121)
Volatile*Zalm	0.280*	(0.137)	-0.184	(0.170)	-0.006	(0.197)
Bos	-0.217**	(0.069)	-0.200**	(0.071)	0.966***	(0.150)
Volatile*Bos	-0.107	(0.116)	0.121	(0.118)	0.059	(0.253)
Government satisfaction	-0.015	(0.147)	0.148	(0.161)	-0.370	(0.245)
Volatile*Gov. satisfaction	0.407	(0.263)	-0.009	(0.285)	-0.074	(0.395)
Constant	-4.669***	(1.008)	-5.901***	(1.099)	6.636***	(1.533)
N	819		819		819	
pseudo R^2	0.452		0.387		0.745	

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

while positive feelings towards prime minister Balkenende significantly increase the probability of voting CDA, this effect is weaker among the volatile (see the negative significant effect of Volatile*Balkenende). With regard to performance evaluations, finally, not only did we not observe an overall effect on vote choices in Table 5, the volatile prove to be not significantly different in this regard.

The results of the vote choice models presented appear to indicate that traditional theories of voting are losing their grip on dealigned voters. We do not find evidence for the claim that the short-term factors within the funnel of causality are of more importance for volatile voters than they are for those who remain loyal to their party, at least when political leaders and performance evaluations are focused upon.

The results obtained from the vote choice models, however, are likely to be biased due to reciprocal causality. With regard to leaders, for example, the problem is basically that one generally likes the leaders of the party that one votes for, without leaders necessarily causing people to vote for this particular party (Bellucci, Garzia and Lewis-Beck, 2014). A similar problem is at stake when focusing on performance evaluations as well (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias, 2008). As next step, therefore, in this paper we validate the conclusions drawn from the vote choice models and investigate voters' reported reasons for choosing the party they voted for.

4.2 Reported reasons for the vote choice

Election studies regularly include questions asking respondents to report what motivated their vote choice in order to gauge vote choice heuristics. While there is considerable debate about whether or not we can ask voters directly what drives their vote choice, open-ended questions on reasons for choosing a party are generally considered informative and insightful on vote choice heuristics (Van Holsteyn, 1994, Swyngedouw, 2001). We hence use the information obtained from such questions to observe if there are indeed substantial differences in the reasons mentioned by stable and volatile voters. Theoretically, for this type of questions as well, we would expect short-term factors such as leaders or performance evaluations to be of more importance for the volatile than for those who remain loyal to their party.

We proceed in the order as used for the vote choice models as well and look at reasons for choosing a party in the 2010 British election first. The 2010 post-electoral survey wave of the 2005-2010 panel only included a closed-ended question asking respondents to indicate the most important reason for their vote choice.² In Table 7 we break down the distributions of the extent to which each of the answer options was chosen by whether or not a voter switched parties between 2005 and 2010. As evident from the results, stable and volatile voters are indeed significantly different in what they report to be the most important reasons for their vote choice. Most importantly, the volatile mention policies significantly less. Furthermore, leadership and tactical considerations are reported to be the most important reason for the vote choice significantly more often among the volatile. While all differences

²The question wording was: 'People give different reasons for why they vote for one party rather than another. Which of the following best describes your reasons?'

Table 7: Reasons for the vote choice in British 2010 election (% respondents indicating reason as most important and 95% confidence intervals)

	Stable	Volatile
The party had the best policies	67.0 [64.4;69.6]	40.4 [36.6;44.2]
The party had the best leader	9.9 [8.3;11.6]	14.8 [12.0;17.5]
I really preferred another party but it stood no chance of winning in my constituency	7.1 [5.7;8.5]	12.4 [9.9;15.0]
I voted tactically	6.6 [5.2;8.0]	15.9 [13.0;18.7]
Other reasons	9.4 [7.8;11.0]	16.5 [13.6;19.4]

Note: Entries in bold are significantly different from each other

are significant, it has to be noted that differences are not very pronounced. Looking at the extent to which leaders -a short term indicator by excellence- are more important for the volatile for example, the difference is only barely significant.

As indicated before, open-ended questions are considered a better way to map the reasons why voters choose a party (Van Holsteyn, 1994). The German and Dutch surveys did include questions on 'why voters voted the way they did' in an open-ended format, so we proceed with information from these questions for investigating the reasons for the vote choice in the German 2005 and Dutch 2003 elections.

Table 8 gives an overview of the most often mentioned reasons for the vote choice in the German 2005 election.³ Unlike what we saw for the closed-ended question in the British case, there are only minor differences between the stable on the one hand and volatile voters on the other. The only significant difference is in the extent to which party ID, party membership or being a long-time supporter of a party are mentioned. While almost 20% of the stable voters mentions this as a reason for the vote, only 6% of the volatile do so. Interestingly, the extent to which leaders or candidates are mentioned is about the same for stable and volatile voters. This result, consequently, does not indicate a shift towards short-term factors. It is true that long-term stabilizing factors are only marginally important for the volatile, but no other motivations seem to compensate therefore.

³Respondents could mention up to four reasons for their vote, which is why percentages add up to more than 100%. The codes in the original dataset were grouped to a more limited set of 10 categories. Only categories that were mentioned by at least 5% of the respondents are included in the overview.

Table 8: Reasons for the vote choice in German 2005 election (% respondents mentioning reason and 95% confidence intervals)

	Stable	Volatile
Program of the party and specific policies	43.7 [39.1;48.4]	37.8 [31.9;43.7]
Negative/protest/anti-large parties	22.8 [18.8;26.7]	30.0 [20.6;31.3]
Party leader or candidates	13.0 [9.8;16.1]	12.2 [8.2;16.2]
Party ID/membership/habit	19.6 [15.9;23.3]	5.7 [2.9;8.6]
The party in general	4.3 [2.4;6.2]	6.5 [3.5;9.5]
Representation of my interests	4.3 [2.4;6.2]	5.3 [2.6;8.1]

Note: Entries in bold are significantly different from each other

Finally, we have a look at the reasons for choosing a party in the Dutch 2003 election as well.⁴ The results presented in Table 9 lend further leverage to the conclusions that could be drawn from the German case. For Dutch voters as well and as could be expected, long-term attachments (feeling, tradition, party membership) are mentioned significantly less often by the volatile than holds for the stable. Furthermore, for the Dutch case as well, the difference in the extent to which candidates are mentioned by volatile and stable voters is not significant. As was observed for the information from the closed-ended question in the British questionnaire, however, the volatile seem to be more tactical when casting their vote. This is evident from the fact that the volatile mention significantly more often than stable voters that they want their party to be the largest.

The results from the descriptive analyses of reported reasons for the vote choice further strengthen the conclusion of the explanatory analyses of vote choices; there are no indications of strong short-term effects among the volatile. On the one hand, it is evident that long-term factors are mentioned significantly less often by the volatile than what holds for stable voters. On the other hand, however, we do not find strong evidence for the claim that short-term factors are consequently of more weight among these dealigned voters.

⁴Coding of open-ended question as available in the original dataset.

Table 9: Reasons for the vote choice in Dutch 2003 election (% respondents mentioning reason and 95% confidence intervals)

	Stable	Volatile
Good political program/good political ideas/ clear/good policy	30.8 [27.1;34.6]	30.8 [28.1;33.6]
Fits with my ideas	25.5 [22.0;29.1]	23.0 [20.5;25.5]
Feeling/tradition/party membership	22.3 [18.9;25.6]	13.7 [11.7;15.8]
First candidate/attracted to people on the list	12.8 [10.1;15.6]	13.3 [11.3;15.3]
Big party/party should be the biggest/stable party	8.9 [6.6;11.2]	13.6 [11.5;15.6]
Norms and values/religion	7.4 [5.2;9.5]	5.0 [3.7;6.3]
Counterweight/strategic vote/ balance in the Second Chamber	6.3 [4.4;8.3]	6.3 [4.8;7.7]

Note: Entries in bold are significantly different from each other

5 Discussion

The process of dealignment has led to substantial changes in voting behavior and an increase in electoral instability. The changes observed furthermore challenge traditional theories of voting behavior, as apparent from the fact that partisanship as well as cleavages are becoming less important over time. What is less well documented, however, is whether this decline of long-term factors is paired with an increase of short-term factors in the vote choice process. In this paper, this question is investigated by comparing voting behavior of stable and volatile voters.

The results of the vote choice models do not offer evidence for the conventional wisdom that dealignment is linked to more weight for the short-term. Overall, we do observe that party-switching is a challenge for traditional theories of voting behavior, as clear from a marked decrease in model fit when volatile voters only are focused upon. Directly comparing the impact of leadership and performance evaluations on the vote choice, furthermore, our results do not support the hypothesis that these would be more important for the volatile than for loyal voters. To the extent that interactions are significant, they even point in opposite directions and would indicate that leaders are less and not more important for the volatile than for the stable.

This finding, however, should be interpreted with some caution. Most importantly so because of the issue of reciprocal causation (Bellucci, Garzia and Lewis-Beck, 2014, Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias, 2008). One approach

to deal with this problem would be to move on to multiple equation modeling and to use instruments for the short-term factors looked at. As especially leadership measured in a feeling thermometer format is likely to be endogenous, another option would be to measure the impact of leaders on the vote by means of leadership traits. Given that reciprocal causation is likely to affect the results for the stable voters more than holds for the volatile, it is essential that ways to solve endogeneity issues are dealt with respect to our research question.

The results from the descriptive analyses on self-reported reasons for the vote choice, however, do seem to give leverage to the claim that leaders are not more important for the volatile than for stable voters. These results basically point out that long-term factors are indeed more important for stable voters, but nothing seems to really compensate for these elements among the volatile. Even though some caution remains, the conclusion of our analyses therefore seems to be that the decrease of long-term factors is not compensated for by an increased weight of the short term.

The consequence of our findings could be that the volatile simply vote randomly and that we are not able to understand how they come to a voting decision. Before drawing that conclusion, however, more factors have to be looked at. Most importantly, the current analyses only focus on the impact of leaders and performance evaluations. Issues as well are considered short-term factors by excellence, so these have to be included. Additionally, the comparison of self-reported reasons for the vote choice seemed to indicate that strategic considerations are more important for volatile voters. Tactical voting as well, therefore, should be looked at when explaining how the dealigned vote.

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